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FRIENDS TO THE HAMMER AND CABLE, SIGNAL SOLDIERS SUPPORT V CORPS' 1ST INFANTRY DIVISION

By Sgt. W. Wayne Marlow
1st Infantry Division Public Affairs Office

FORWARD OPERATING BASE BRASSFIELD-MORA, Iraq – At first, Sgt. Patrick Davis compares his job as a tactical communications specialist to that of a switchboard operator. But after further thought, he thinks that might not be entirely accurate.

"It's a little more in-depth than that," he said. "In the civilian world, the lines are already run. When we first come to a site, there's nothing here."

Davis and his fellow Soldiers in V Corps' A Company, 121st Signal Battalion, 1st Infantry Division, are responsible for the communication needs of the division's 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry. The first step in their mission is to get communications towers set up. And that's where any analogies with switchboard operators come to an end.

"It's a lot of backbreaking work," Davis said. "We are very good friends with the sledgehammer."

Next to Davis, nodding in agreement, sits Pfc. Darious Hypolite. "If you're not ready for it, you're gonna get hurt," Hypolite said. "If you're not prepared to handle the weight, you're not gonna get very far."

Davis said the section can have a communications system running within two days. But after Soldiers finish with the heavy labor, the more technical side of the job looms.

"That's where it gets tricky," Davis said. "If we get out there on day one and have difficulty, the bulk of us will be there until we get everything 100 percent. Sometimes you get lucky and it works like magic; sometimes it doesn't."

The section handles troubleshooting every day, according to Davis. "Sometimes all it takes is the right vehicle to run over it, or a mortar to hit it," he said. "A mortar took out half the phones on the FOB."

But Davis and his men had it up and running again shortly. "Training and teamwork are the keys," he said. "I've got a group of people at another site. If we're not working together, it can go very badly quickly."

So far, losing communications to a mortar has been a one-time occurrence for the Alpha Company Soldiers. But other problems are more prevalent.

"There's always new problems," said Spc. Hector Cruz. "When you fix something, there's something else waiting. It's definitely good to be in Signal, because you've got stuff to do."

The most common problems, according to Davis, are phones and the Internet going down. And while there are step-by-step fix-it methods, it doesn't always work out that way.

"That may not help," Davis said. "You have to be very flexible."

